

**McCabe UMC**  
**The Royal Law**  
**James 2:1-10 \* Luke 16:19-31: September 2, 2012 (Labor Day)**  
**Pastor Rick Fossum**

A man said to his friend, **“I can’t break my wife of the habit of staying up until five in the morning.”**

**“What is she doing,”** the friend asked?

**“She’s waiting for me to get home,”** he replied.

Bad habits. We all have them.

Or, maybe you heard about the woman who walked up to a little old man rocking in a chair on his porch. **“I couldn’t help noticing how happy you look,”** she said. **“What’s your secret?”**

**“Well,”** he replied, **“I smoke three packs of cigarettes a day. I drink a case of whiskey every week. I eat fatty foods and I never exercise.”**

**“Wow! That is amazing,”** said the woman. **“How old are you?”**

**“Twenty-six,”** he replied.

Bad habits. We all have habits and some of them are good habits and some aren’t so good.

Even the church, this one and everyone, has bad habits. In the first century church, they had the bad habit of judging people. They were partial to people with money. If a person walked into a first century church with nice clothes and expensive jewelry, church members would bend over backwards to make sure they were welcomed properly. But, if someone wearing rags walked in . . . well, you get the idea. They weren’t so welcome.

This was one reason John Wesley never made it far in the Church of England. When he was a young pastor just getting started, he looked around and saw how the Church of England was catering to the rich and famous and powerful. If you weren’t rich or famous or powerful, the church didn’t want anything to do with you. It was a bad habit. They judged people based on their outside appearances rather than the inside.

John Wesley didn't like that bad habit. And so, throughout his life, he made sure to include the poor, the widowed, the sick, the unemployed and the elderly in his ministry. The Church of England responded to Wesley by ordering him to stay away from their churches.

James had some harsh words for the early church, **“Listen, dear friends. Isn't it clear by now that God operates quite differently? He chose the world's down-and-out as the kingdom's first citizens, with full rights and privileges. This kingdom is promised to anyone who loves God. And here you are abusing these same citizens!”**  
-James 2:5-6 (MSG)

James was criticizing the first century church and their bad habit of judging people based on their outside appearance, rather than taking the time to find out what was on the inside.

Years ago, a minister by the name of Bishop Potter purchased a ticket to sail to Europe on an ocean liner. When he went on board, he found out that another passenger was going to share the cabin with him. He met his new shipmate and didn't like what or whom he saw. He went to the main desk and asked if he could leave his gold watch and other valuables in the ship's safe. He explained that **“ordinarily I wouldn't do that, but when I went to my cabin and met my new roommate, I had other thoughts. Judging from his appearance,”** Bishop Potter said, **“I'm afraid that my roommate might not be a trustworthy person.”**

The person at the main desk took Bishop Potter's valuables and said, **“It's all right, bishop, I'll be glad to take care of them for you. By the way, your roommate was just here and he left his valuables with us for the same reason!”**

So, how do we get rid of bad habits? How do we stop judging people by the way they look or talk or dress? The answer is not a better theology or morals or ethics. The answer is developing better habits.

Charles Duhigg, a reporter for the *New York Times*, has written a book called *The Power of Habit*. In his book, he tells the story of different companies that found success simply by replacing old, bad habits, with new, better habits.

For example, Starbucks did a survey in the 1990s. They examined customer complaints and how they were being handled by their employees. The goal was to have better customer service. They discovered that their employees weren't doing a good job when it came to customer complaints. And so they created something they call the **LATTE** method of customer service. **LATTE** is an acronym and it stands for the following:

**Listen** to the customer.

**Apologize.**

**Take** responsibility.

**Take** action.

**Easy** feedback.

Starbucks wants their customers to know that they care about them and their complaints. With this new habit, customer service has radically improved and Starbucks is doing better than ever.

Irene Rosenfeld is the CEO and chairperson of Kraft Foods Inc. She turned her company around by traveling around the world meeting with employees and asking for their input. She used technologies like podcasts and webcasts to communicate effectively with both employees and customers. Better communication was one of the keys to turning around Kraft Inc.

Today, thanks to Irene Rosenfeld and her leadership, Kraft's operating costs have declined and many of its products are highly rated by consumers. And . . . and the company has enjoyed substantial growth.

It's a matter of exchanging bad habits for good habits. Alcoa aluminum company was sluggish in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Paul O'Neill was hired as their chief executive officer (CEO). Investors hoped he would increase revenue, but he focused instead on decreasing employee accidents from unsafe work habits. He instituted new procedures that required employees to be more cautious. Over the next decade, the company's operating costs have declined while their income has skyrocketed because he helped exchange bad habits for good habits.

The book of James has suggestion for churches that are in need of better habits. He begins by urging churches to obey the law of love. James calls this the *Royal Law* of Scripture. "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*" For James, this means treating others as we want to be treated. It means showing the same mercy to others that we want to receive from them. James writes, "**loving others is the *Royal Law* because it's the rule that stands at the very center of God's kingdom.**"

When the church, this church and every church, judges others by their appearance, we break the *Royal Law*. This is a bad habit. It has no place in God's kingdom where all people, rich and poor, male and female are God's people.

In our passage today from Luke, Jesus teaches us the same lesson. It's the story of the rich man and Lazarus.

Imagine the story with a 21st century twist. A rich man lives in a gated community. It's for wealthy people only. The rich man has everything including

money, power, position, reputation.

Every day, a poor, homeless man by the name of Larry stands by the gate of this exclusive community. He's dirty. His clothes are dirty. His hair is dirty. His face is dirty. He wants nothing more than a few scraps of food from this rich man.

But, the rich man has the bad habit of looking down on Larry. "**Get a job,**" he shouts at Larry as he drives past him every morning.

Larry dies and is carried away by angels to be with Abraham in heaven. The rich man also dies and is buried. The rich man is in a place where he is being tormented every day. It's called hell. He looked up and he saw Larry and Abraham just chillin' out.

The rich man called out to them. "**Abraham, have mercy on me. Order Larry to bring me a glass of ice cold water. I'm in agony here.**"

Even in the afterlife, the rich man is treating Larry just like he used to treat him.

Abraham shook his head 'no.' The rich man changed his request. "**Abraham, then I beg you to send Larry back to warn my brothers and sisters. I don't want them to end up in this awful place.**"

Again, Abraham said 'no.' He reminded the rich man, "**they have ministers and pastors and the church. They should listen to them.**"

The words of James hit the rich man right between the eyes: "**For if you refuse to act kindly, you can hardly expect to be treated kindly**" (James 2:13 (MSG)).

In the movie *The Iron Lady*, Meryl Streep plays the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. She gives this advice about habits:

*Watch your thoughts for they become words.  
Watch your words for they become actions.  
Watch your actions for they become habits.  
Watch your habits for they become your character.  
And watch your character, for it becomes your destiny.  
What we think we become.*

I think it's time for us, as individuals and as the church, to get into the habit of loving our neighbors as ourselves. After all, it's the Royal Law of Scripture.